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ABSTRACT

Research has suggested that race and sex are strongly associated with the "imposter phenomenon" (I-P), a secret, intense, subjective self-perception of phoniness experienced by many high achievers. Sex, race, and perceived atypicality were examined in relation to the imposter phenomenon for 30 persons with adequate achievement in career areas represented by blacks and whites, and men and women. Subjects responded to demographic questions, the I-P Scale, and questions designed to elicit phenomenological self-perceptions of atypicality. Results revealed no significant differences for either sex or race, and no significant interaction between the two. When subjects classified as high or low in I-P were compared for indications of self-perceived atypicality, high I-P subjects reported that they perceived their careers as significantly less typical for their sex than did low I-P subjects. High I-P subjects also reported attainment of an unusually high level of education in relation to their families, while low I-P subjects indicated a level of educational attainment significantly more consistent with that of their families. The results suggest that previous research associating race and sex differences with the imposter phenomenon may have been confounded with issues of self-perceived atypicality. (NRB)

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The Impostor Phenomenon and Achievement: Issues of Sex, Race,
and Self-Perceived Atypicality

J.C. Harvey, L.H. Kidder, and L. Sutherland

Introduction and Purpose

The term "impostor phenomenon" has been coined by Clance and Imes(1980) to designate an intense, subjective experience of phoniness among persons with documented histories of success. Although others perceive them as capable and intelligent, people who experience the impostor phenomenon persist in the secret belief that they are actually less competent or intelligent than their peers. Despite such objective indications of their ability as high test scores, earned degrees, conferred honors, and professional advancements, they perceive themselves as "overachievers" or "mere impostors"; and concomitantly fear eventual discovery and unmasking by professionally significant others.

Those who suffer from the impostor phenomenon tend to attribute their achievements to such interpersonal assets as attractiveness, sensitivity, wit, charm, or successful impression management; or else to the expenditure of intense, unrelenting efforts to prepare for every project and test(Clance & Imes, 1978; Stahl, Turner, Wheeler, & Elbert, 1980). Their cognitive patterns appear to be based on extreme sensitivity to both internal and external information when processing information about identity; and the social context

in which their achievements occur is often ambiguous, containing multiple possible causes for their successes, leading to the discounting of ability as the most important cause (Harvey, 1981).

Thus, the highly resistant quality of the impostor phenomenon appears to result from a complex interplay among four factors: 1) interpersonal assets that so-called "impostors" possess; 2) behaviors that they practice, such as successful impression management and unvarying efforts to prepare; 3) cognitive styles of self-perception indicating a failure to internalize the role of a high achiever, along with its accompanying rewards; and 4) ambiguous achievement situations in which circumstances, or other people, reinforce the discounting of ability as the primary cause of success. Examples of ambiguous situations are: 1) a situation in which a quota system or affirmative action program exists as a salient cause for a black or a woman to be admitted to a college or hired for a job; and 2) a situation in which sleeping with a boss or professor exists as a salient cause for an employee's promotion, or a student's "A" in a course.

Previous research suggests that both race and sex are strongly associated with the impostor phenomenon. In particular, Stahl et al. report that young black women entering the fields of science and engineering attribute their success in school primarily to effort, rather than ability; and believe others see them as more intelligent than they really are. Similarly, Clance and Imes suggest that Horner's (1968) fear of success hypothesis may lead women to deny success by erroneously attributing their achievements to fooling other people; they are thus able to live out

their achievement orientation in traditionally male areas, while simultaneously reducing subconscious fears of social penalties for their out-of-role accomplishments. In addition, Clance and Imes submit, a review of attribution research supports their observations of intense impostor self-perceptions among high achieving women, but only rare instances among their male colleagues.

A general finding that women tend to attribute success to temporary causes, such as luck or effort; whereas men tend to attribute it more to the enduring characteristic of ability (Deaux, 1976), is consistent with Clance and Imes's conceptualization of women as more vulnerable to the impostor phenomenon than men.

Similarly, research on race differences in locus of control indicates that blacks may be more reluctant than whites to take personal responsibility for their successes, thereby becoming more vulnerable to the impostor phenomenon. Studies of perceived locus of control suggest that blacks, more than whites, tend to perceive events generally, as the result of luck or the way society is constructed, rather than under their personal control (Gurin, Gurin, Lao, & Beattie, 1969; Joe, 1971; Lefcourt, 1972; Phares, 1976).

Moreover, Kelley's (1972) principles of discounting and covariation may be highly operative for both blacks and women who achieve success in the ambiguous social context of the present day. Quota systems and affirmative action programs, by increasing the number of attributional alternatives available to high achieving blacks and/or women, may influence them to discount their ability as the primary cause of their achievements, thereby heightening their vulnerability to impostor self-perceptions.

In addition to investigating race and sex differences in the impostor phenomenon, suggested by previous work, this study is designed to discover whether those differences may have been confounded with issues of self-perceived atypicality, irrespective of race and sex.

For example, it is possible that both men and women may assume an impostor identity as a means of coping with "fear of success". Studies by Alper (1974) and Cherry and Deaux (1975) indicate that men who succeed in traditionally feminine endeavors, such as nursing and elementary education, may wish to deny their real abilities to avoid anticipated penalties for out-of-role achievements, as much as do women who succeed in traditionally masculine fields. Moreover, men's need for achievement appears to be decreasing (McClelland, 1976), accompanied by a disillusionment with the outward trappings of traditional career success, and a reorienting of priorities in life (Condry & Dyer, 1976). Psychoanalysts have long recognized that people in general may wish to deny success because it is subconsciously associated with guilt feelings and separation anxieties. Thus, any person whose success signals guilt for surpassing a parent, or alienation from the family, has a motive to deny success, irrespective of race or sex.

A second possible counterhypothesis to basic race and sex differences in the impostor phenomenon rests on the issue of perceived atypicalities in self-perception. Simply perceiving oneself as "out of place" in terms of a seemingly irrelevant

characteristic may be interpreted as evidence that one does not "belong" among one's peers, and is therefore, an impostor. Whichever features differentiate people from their peers are often more important to their identities than what they have in common. Some research indicates that people are highly aware of unique qualities, such as sex or race, that set them apart from those around them, and tend to weight those unique features disproportionately in their self-definitions (McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). Thus, if one is saliently atypical of one's group in sex, race, age, social class, or attractiveness, one may be more vulnerable to feeling like an impostor among others at the same level of achievement.

The present study focuses on issues of sex, race, and perceived atypicality in relation to the impostor phenomenon. Three basic questions are addressed: 1) Do women experience the impostor phenomenon more than men? 2) Do blacks experience it more than whites? and 3) Is it possible that hypothesized sex and race differences in the impostor phenomenon have been confounded with self-perceptions of atypicality, regardless of sex or race?

Methods

Design

To assess possible effects of race and sex differences in the impostor phenomenon, a 2X2 fixed model design, with race and sex as the independent variables, is used. The dependent variable is impostor phenomenon intensity.

In addition, the relationship between high or low impostor phenomenon intensity and various aspects of self-perceived atypicality is examined. To accomplish this, subjects are classified as above or below median impostor phenomenon intensity for the sample. High and Low groups are then compared on their feelings of being atypical in career and education for their gender, race, age, personal appearance, and family background.

The following predictions are tested:

- 1) That women experience the impostor phenomenon more intensely than men, and blacks more than whites.
- 2) That persons high in the impostor phenomenon tend to perceive themselves as more atypical of others with the same career than those who are low.
- 3) That persons high in the impostor phenomenon tend to surpass their families in educational attainment more than those who are low.

Subjects and Setting. Subjects were chosen from three general career areas where blacks and whites, as well as men and women, are adequately represented: 1) urban education; 2) an urban government service program; and 3) an urban crisis counseling center. The sample of 30 subjects is thus composed of persons who can be considered adequate achievers in our society: high school teachers; social workers; counselors; and middle-management administrators in the three above-named areas.

All subjects have at least a Bachelor's degree, or are enrolled part-time in an undergraduate program related to their field. None are full-time students.

Subjects were recruited through an oral request to participate in a university-sponsored research project. They were asked to anonymously complete and return a survey questionnaire. Later,

they were supplied with a feedback sheet explaining the project.

Procedures. Data collected in the anonymous, self-administered questionnaire included the subjects' sex, race, age, educational level, amount and type of job training, and present career position.

In addition, subjects were asked to respond to the I-P Scale, developed by Harvey (1981) as a reliable, internally consistent measure of the impostor phenomenon, with demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity, that is suitable for anonymous self-administration. The I-P Scale contains 14 declarative statements on which people rate themselves on a seven choice scale, ranging from "Not at all true" to "Very true"; for example:

In general, people tend to believe I am more competent than I really am.
 NOT AT ALL _____ VERY
 TRUE _____ TRUE

Finally, subjects were asked to respond to a series of scaled questions designed to elicit phenomenological self-perceptions of atypicality. Self-perceptions of atypicality in career were assessed along dimensions of gender, race, age, and personal appearance, as in these examples:

Indicate the degree to which you feel your career is typical of people similar to you in such attributes as:

1) Sex

VERY ATYPICAL _____ VERY TYPICAL

2) Race

VERY ATYPICAL _____ VERY TYPICAL

It is worth noting that these questions focus on the subjects' self-perceptions of their atypicality, rather than on atypicality in a factual sense. Atypicality of educational attainment, in relation to family, was similarly assessed.

Analyses. To assess the effects of sex and race on impostor phenomenon intensity, a two factor analysis of variance of I-P Scale scores was performed, using the classic experimental approach and method of unweighted means; thus, main effects for the two independent variables, race and sex, were assessed prior to the possible effect of their interaction.

Secondly, the median impostor phenomenon intensity was computed for the sample. A median split procedure was subsequently carried out to classify subjects as high or low in the impostor phenomenon. The high and low groups were then compared, using t tests of means on the various measures of self-perceived atypicality.

Results. The result of the two factor analysis of variance of impostor phenomenon intensity revealed no significant differences for either sex or race; neither was there any significant interaction between the two factors. Thus, hypothesized race and sex differences in impostor phenomenon intensity failed to be confirmed in this sample.

However, when subjects classified as high or low in the impostor phenomenon were compared for indications of self-perceived atypicality, using one-tailed t tests, the following significant differences emerged.

First, subjects scoring above the I-P Scale median of 28.5 reported that they perceive their careers as significantly less typical for their sex ($p < .05$) than do subjects with low impostor phenomenon intensity.

The atypicality hypothesis was similarly confirmed for educational attainment in relation to family background; i.e., per-

sons in the high I-P group reported, that they have attained an unusually high level of education in relation to their family backgrounds; whereas, in contrast, persons in the low I-P group indicated a level of educational attainment significantly more consistent with that of their families and relatives ($p < .05$).

Atypicality differences between the high and low I-P groups did not emerge as significant on the dimensions of race, age, or personal appearance.

Conclusions

The results of this investigation suggest that in the past, race and sex differences, thought to be associated with the impostor phenomenon, may have been confounded with issues of self-perceived atypicality. In other words, people are equally vulnerable to the impostor phenomenon regardless of whether they are male or female, black or white. Of greater consequence are people's perceptions of themselves as atypical, or out of place, in their careers, and in relation to their family backgrounds.

In particular, perceiving one's career as atypical for one's gender seems to elicit impostor feelings. This supports Cherry and Deaux's findings that both men and women may potentially wish to avoid penalties for achievements that violate traditional societal expectations. If they explain their out-of-role successes as the result of "overachievement" or fooling other people, then they can continue to achieve while denying personal talents suited to their gender-atypical endeavors.

That the atypicality hypothesis was confirmed for gender, but not for other dimensions in regard to career, may indicate that the interplay between gender and career is unusually salient

to self-definition in today's world.

Differences in atypicality on the dimensions of age and personal appearance most likely did not emerge because most subjects had age-peers among their coworkers, and did not differ greatly in personal appearance. It is possible that the term "personal appearance" is too ambiguous, and ought to be further broken down into more concrete dimensions, such as "physical attractiveness", in future research.

Impostor feelings in relation to atypicality of race may not have emerged in this sample, because the black subjects were not "token" employees. Because the study was designed to test possible main effects for race and sex on the impostor phenomenon, the sample was chosen so that blacks would be adequately represented. Thus, the black subjects in this sample were not in token positions, but had many black coworkers. Thus, they would be less likely to perceive themselves as atypical.

Finally, the confirmation of the atypicality hypothesis for educational attainment indicates support for the prediction that people are more vulnerable to the impostor phenomenon when they surpass their families and relatives in educational status. This result may be interpreted from two viewpoints: 1) the perspective of psychoanalytic motivation; or 2) the perspective of perceptual development. Those who take the first view would assert that the impostor phenomenon is elicited by an unconscious wish to deny success when it is associated with guilt or with separation anxieties. The latter view could account for the relationship between impostor self-perceptions and family-atypical achievement in perceptual terms, without inferring any motivation, as follows. A per-

son's ascribed social status is partially a function of educational attainment; but social status, as an aspect of the self-concept, is acquired early in life as a part of family identity. A person who attains a level of education far surpassing that of his or her family, must phenomenologically incorporate a new social status into the self-concept. The perceptual accommodation process necessary to modify the self-concept may be much slower than the rapid social mobility achieved through education. Thus, a person may feel like an impostor because he or she is playing the roles associated with the new social status, but has not internalized or assimilated those roles into the self-concept.

Conversely, people low in the impostor phenomenon report an educational level more consistent with that of family and relatives. They are not required to accommodate a new social status corresponding to their educational achievements, and are therefore less vulnerable to the impostor self-perception.

To summarize: the results of this investigation indicate that future research should be designed to avoid confounding the effects of race and sex with those of self-perceived atypicality, both in the study of the impostor phenomenon and in related areas. In particular, the influences of gender-atypical careers and socio-educational mobility should not be neglected.

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance of Impostor Phenomenon Intensity by
Sex and Race

Source	SS	DF	MS	F	p
Sex	22.81	1	22.81	.211	ns
Race	75.92	1	75.92	.702	ns
Sex X Race	17.81	1	17.81	.165	ns
Residual	2813.26	26	108.20		
Total	2929.80	29	101.03		

N=30

Critical .05 $F_{1,26} = 4.24$

Table 2

Results of T Test Comparing Perceived Sex Role Typicality.
of Career for Persons High and Low in Impostor Phenomenon
Intensity

Impostor Phenomenon Intensity	N	Mean	SD	SE	t	DF	one-tailed p
High	15	3.67	1.80	.455	-2.06	28	.024 *
Low	15	4.80	1.15	.296			

* $p < .05$

critical .05 $t_{28} = 1.701$

Note: A higher mean indicates that subjects reported perceiving
their career as more typical of their sex.

Table 3

Results of T Test Comparing Perceived Typicality
of Educational Attainment, in Relation to Family
Background, for Persons High and Low in Impostor Phenomenon
Intensity

Impostor Phenomenon Intensity	N	Mean	SD	SE	t	DF	one tailed p
High	15	2.67	2.44	.63	-1.93	22.2	.033 *
Low	15	4.07	1.39	.36			

* $p < .05$

critical .05 one-tailed
 $t_{22.2} = 1.72$

Note:

Because group variances were unequal, an approximate t test, based on Welch's (1937) distribution, was used.

The higher mean indicates that subjects' educational attainment is typical of their families; and the lower mean indicates that it is atypical.

Table 4

Item-Total Statistics for Revised I-P Scale

 $\alpha = .85$

Item	Mean	SD	Corrected I-T Correlation	Alpha If Item Deleted
1. In general, people tend to believe I am more competent than I really am.	2.97	1.42	.38	.84
* 2. I am certain my present level of achievement results from true ability.	1.86	1.61	.51	.83
3. Sometimes I am afraid I will be discovered for who I really am.	2.76	1.42	.63	.82
* 4. I find it easy to accept compliments about my intelligence.	2.86	1.75	.49	.83
* 5. I feel I deserve whatever honors, recognition, or praise I receive.	1.81	1.36	.59	.82
6. At times I have felt I am in my present position or academic program through some kind of mistake.	2.11	1.82	.71	.81
* 7. I feel confident that I will succeed in the future.	1.46	1.04	.46	.83
8. I tend to feel like a phony.	1.57	1.36	.67	.82
9. My personality or charm often makes a strong impression on people in authority.	4.14	1.26	.15	.84
* 10. I consider my accomplishments adequate for this stage in my life.	2.11	1.75	.39	.84
* 11. In discussions, if I disagree with my professor or boss, I speak out.	2.70	1.53	.32	.84
12. I often achieve success on a project or test when I have anticipated I would fail.	3.40	1.73	.56	.83
13. I often feel I am concealing secrets about myself from others.	3.00	1.77	.59	.82
* 14. My public and private self are the same person.	3.30	1.58	.29	.84

* Rescored in positive direction

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